Taking Sides on the Great War

As commemorations of the outbreak of the First World War get underway, Stephen Cooper offers an overview of the often fierce debate among British historians about the conduct and course of the conflict over the last hundred years.
as acknowledge its guilt. The Article was criticized in some liberal circles but it represented a widely-shared view. At around the same time approximately 750,000 British war widows were receiving medals, which proudly declared that the war had been worthwhile, despite the unprecedented sacrifice. These medals were inscribed with the words ‘For Freedom and for Honour’ on one side and ‘The Great War for Civilisation’ on the other. Yet, as Michael Gove has realized, it now seems to be a truth almost universally acknowledged that Germany was not uniquely to blame; and that the First World War, so far from being worthwhile, was ‘futile’ and/or ‘pointless’. How have we travelled so far, in just a hundred years?

The great memorials designed by Lutyens in France and Flanders did not convey an anti-war message; nor do the smaller war memorials in thousands of churches and churchyards in the towns and villages of Britain. At the time these edifices were erected a majority felt that there was no contradiction between Christianity and patriotism, or between loyalty to the Empire and loyalty to internationalism. The identification is not so easily made now.

Great War, Just War
There is a contrast between the spirit of some of the anti-war poetry (at least as remembered by later generations) and that displayed in the prose. If Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen inspired a generation with anti-war sentiments, the same cannot be said for Robert Graves’ Goodbye to All That, which first appeared in 1919. The book is generally thought to be anti-war, but it reads more like a tribute to the bloody-minded determination of the British soldier. Likewise Frank Richards’ Old Soldiers Never Die, which was published in 1923, pays tribute to Tommy Atkins. Nor is the message of Frederic Manning’s Her Privates We, first published in 1919, anti-war. It certainly tells us that the war was cruel and horrible, but the soldiers portrayed in it take a stubborn pride in being undefeated and they seem in no doubt that the war is necessary. In 1938 J. C. Dunn published The War the Infantry Knew. This again gives an entirely different view from that given by Sassoon and Owen; in short, it is much more upbeat. Dunn expressly ‘wanted to correct the popular notion of the war’...being uniformly a history of mud and blood, of doom and gloom. He portrayed ‘relaxation and jollity and mere boredom and their place alongside hardship & bloodshed’.

In Britain the rise of Hitler and the advent of the Second World War had two opposite effects on attitudes towards the First. On the one hand the startling successes of the German armies between 1939 and 1942 seemed to demonstrate the folly of attrition, because the Panzers did not become bogged down in trenches. They used tanks and achieved mobility while military casualties (at least on the Western Front) were relatively light. On the other hand, the Second World War reinforced the view that the First had been inevitable and even worthwhile. In Historians I Have Known (1994) the Oxford historian A.L. Rowse expressed the view that the Second World War was essentially a continuation of the First and that both had been started and resumed by Germany to achieve European and world domination. It was a view commonly held by his generation.

Revisionism
On the other hand, as early as 1920, in his memoir of British headquarters at Montreuil-Sur-Mer, the journalist Frank Fox recognized that there were already several controversies surrounding the Great War.

There is a controversy, whether the first Commander-in-Chief[Sir John French] should have been recalled when he was; about the merits of the second C-in-C[Sir
Douglas Haig; about the ‘unity of command’ decision [to make Fuch supreme commander]; about the relative merits of a strategy which would concentrate everything for a supreme effort in France and a strategy which would seek a ‘back door’ to the German citadel; about the actual cause and duration of the shell shortage.

These controversies and others like them refused to go away and in the 1930s they were extensively discussed by David Lloyd George in his War Memoirs and by Winston Churchill in his World Crisis of 1912-1918. Both men had served in the Cabinet during the war: Lloyd George as prime minister; Churchill at the Admiralty, while Churchill had at one stage commanded a battalion in the field. The historian John Terraine attributed part of the blame for the growth of ‘disenchantment’ with the war to these two books. He even thought that Churchill’s World Crisis made a substantial contribution to the growth of the idea that Germany ought to be appeased, though Churchill famously changed his mind about that. In his History of the First World War (1930) Sir Basil Liddell Hart was likewise very critical of the offensives which had been launched on the Western Front by Douglas Haig. Yet these writers, though critical of strategy, tactics and leadership, did not criticise the decision to go to war, nor did they argue that the war had not been worthwhile.

A younger generation took a different view. In the infamous ‘King and Country’ debate at the Oxford Union on February 9th, 1933 the motion ‘that this House will in no circumstances fight for its King and Country’ was carried by 275 votes to 153. Perhaps even more significant was the Peace Pledge Union, which emerged in 1934 and quickly gained 135,000 members. The Union had several well-known figures heads, including the writer Aldous Huxley, the philosopher Bertrand Russell, the Methodist Donald Soper and the poet Siegfried Sassoon. At least initially, it supported appeasement, believing that Nazi Germany would cease to threaten the peace if the alleged injustices of the Versailles Treaty were reversed.

In the 1960s Wilfrid Owen’s poems became widely known for the first time, partly as a result of the success of Benjamin Britten’s oratorio War Requiem (1962), which featured several of them. Then came the stage production, by Gerry Raffles and Joan Littlewood, of Oh! What a Lovely War (1963), which made into a memorable film in 1969. This conveyed the idea that the war had been no more than pointless and callous slaughter to a mass audience. Perhaps the only event which has had as much influence in recent years was the last episode of Blackadder Goes Forth (broadcast by the BBC in 1989), where the same message of futility was brilliantly conveyed.

Meanwhile the cult of the war poets grew and grew. Paul Fussell’s The Great War and Modern Memory was first published in 1975. For Fussell the collective experience of the war marked a seismic shift in aesthetic perception, from a kind of Romanticism that had guided the prewar generation to much harsher themes which predominated thereafter. The book was a bestseller and has long been critically acclaimed, but it is a work of literary criticism rather than history and it is very one-sided. It deprecated any poet who took the view that Britain had little choice but to declare war on Germany in August 1914, that in 1918 she and her allies defeated Germany in the field and that, ultimately, the sacrifice was worthwhile. Fussell regards it as axiomatic that Sassoon was right when he protested in 1917 that ‘the truth about the war is that it is ruining England and has no good reason for continuing’. This was a view shared by Aldous Huxley, though not by Robert Graves, who tried to dissuade Sassoon from continuing with his protest. Yet, with hindsight, we can see that Sassoon’s idea of a compromise peace with Germany at that date was always a pipe dream, not least because the Germans were having none of it.

**New Thinking**

The 1960s saw the birth of a new school of history, which was highly critical of the revisionist view. This resulted in works by John Terraine: Norman Stone, Hew Strachan, Gary Sheffield, David Stevenson and others. In particular Terraine’s books were extremely influential. In Monstr: The Retreat to Victory (1960), Douglas Haig; The Educated Soldier (1963), The First World War (1963), The Road to Passchendaele (1977), To Win a War: 1918, the Year of Victory (1978) and The Smoke and the Fire (1990) he reminded his readers that the Allies had won the war between July and November 1918; that (contrary to Nazi mythology) the German army was defeated on the Western Front; that the British army played a leading role in that victory; that the contribution of the Americans, except in terms of morale, was minor; and that the British generals were not ‘donkeys’ but men who did their best with the technology they had in appalling conditions. Further, there had been no easy way to win the war in the trenches. Since the French insisted that their territory be liberated, tanks and planes were as yet primitive and Germany had no soft underbelly; it was necessary to defeat the main strength of the German army on the Western Front and that inevitably involved very costly offensives.

The cumulative effect of this new thinking was to re-establish the view that the war was worthwhile and that it did achieve the defeat of German militarism, even if it did not prove final and the fruits of victory were arguably squandered at Versailles. Indeed, by the end of the 20th century, it could almost be said that this was the new conventional wisdom among
academics. It should also be said, however, that
many, if not most people in Britain have contin-
ued to look at the matter entirely differently. As
Professors Sheffield and Strachan have each
rarely conceded, it is virtually impossible to win
the wider argument because ‘the legacy of litera-
ture and its effects on the shaping of memory has
proved more influential in shaping the ideas of
the general public than economic or political
reality’.

The result is that it appears to be taken for
granted now, by wide sections of the community,
that all participants were equally to blame for the
Great War and that the war itself was futile. So it is
that Ben Shephard greets Max Hastings’ Cata-
racte (2013), a serious work which re-states the case
for German culpability, with the remark ‘When
in doubt, blame the
Kraut’ (the Observer,
September 15th, 2013);
Ian Jack criticises Jeremy
Faxon’s Great Britain’s
Great War (1953), which
argues that it was both unavoidable and necessary,
as falling short because ‘We cannot understand
this and still believe the war to be futile’ (the Guardian,
October 5th, 2013); and Dominic Sandbrook says
that Margaret MacMillan’s The War that Ended
Peace (2013) is ‘particularly hard on the Germans’.
Sandbrook also opines that Christopher Clark’s The
Sleepwalkers (2013) ‘has blasted holes in the well-
known theory that the war was all the fault of the
Germans’.

Counterfactual History
The rehabilitation of virtual, or counterfactual,
history lends respectability to what has now
become a deep-seated anti-war prejudice. In 1997
Niall Ferguson edited Virtual History: Alternatives
and Counterfactuals. Ferguson’s own chapter
on the First World War – ‘The Kaiser’s European
Union’ – points out that war was not inevitable;
that the British were not obliged to declare war on
Germany when they did; and that the Germans
very nearly won the war in 1914 and would almost
certainly have done so if the British had not
intervened. These are not particularly controver-
sial statements, but Ferguson also postulates that
the result of a German victory would have been
‘something like the European Union’, half a century
ahead of its time: a German-led association of states
in Europe, much like we have now, but without the
catastrophic damage inflicted on all sides by the
events of 1915-18. This echoes a suggestion made by
the German historian Immanuel Geiss in 1990 and
indeed discussed by Ferguson himself in The Myth
of War (1998).

Others have followed suit. In his diversing
Germania (2010) Simon Winder argues that it
would have been better if Germany had won a quick
victory in the first year of the war, since ‘a Europe
dominated by the Germany of 1914 would have
been infinitely preferable to a Europe dominated
by the Germany of 1939’. In his review of Hastings’
Catastrophe, published in the Sunday Times on
September 15th, 2013, Sandbrook takes much the
same line:

Had we stayed out in August 1914, allowing the Central
Powers to win a relatively quick victory, the world
would surely have been spared the horrors of Nazism,
the agony of the Holocaust and the tyranny of Stalin.
The Kaiser’s Europe might not have been much fun at
first, but it would probably have evolved into some-
ting more tolerable. In any case, could it really have
been worse than what happened?

The idea that a German victory in the First World
War would have brought about something akin to
the European Union a century later assumes many
things, but in particular it assumes an early and easy
victory, say in September 1914, when the Germans
nearly reached Paris, as they had in 1870 and were
to do again in 1940. But one is entitled to ask what
would have happened if they had broken through in
April 1918 in Flanders, at the time of Douglas Haig’s
‘Backs to the Wall’ Order – as seemed all too likely
at the time. By this stage of the war, German losses
in blood and treasure were already enormous and
many influential Germans, in particular in the high
command, had come to the view that Germany was
entitled to demand, at least, that the territories
it occupied in Belgium and France be ceded to it.
Moreover, Germany had by this time won the
war in the East, where she did indeed impose a vic-
tor’s peace. Norman Stone once suggested that,
if we wanted to know what a German-dictated
peace in the West might have looked like, we
had only to read the terms of the Treaty of Brest-
Litovsk of March 3rd, 1918, when Russia was made
to renounce all its territorial claims in Finland, the
future Baltic states, Belarus, and Ukraine. Stone
also pointed out in his World War One: A Short
History (2008):

Nowadays, Germany has the most important role... but
there is a vast difference: back then she was aiming
at world empire, but now, in alliance with the West,
she offers no such aims... The common language is now
English, and not German... Modern Europe is Brest-
Litovsk with a human face [but] it took a Second World
War and an Anglo-American occupation of Germany
for us to get there.

Ultimately, we cannot know the answer to a coun-
terfactual question. If we spend too long asking
“What if?” we find ourselves writing fiction, yet
failing to compete with the novelists. Meanwhile,
the serious questions about the First World War
remain that cannot just be left to the politicians.

Stephen Cooper’s book Agincourt: Myths and Reality
1415-2015 will be published by Pen and Sword in 2014.